

Letters To the Editor

Thursday, September 1, 2005; Page GZ04

Nurture Girls' Tech Skills

Attention all parents: Do you know where your children's technology skills are?

Look around. Our own Bethesda best-selling writer and resident, Thomas Friedman, is right -- the world is flat! Technology is driving our future. Most elements of daily living these days are controlled by high-tech devices and assumptions that we never imagined 10 years ago. The computers used in new cars today are more powerful and complex than those that helped the Apollo program reach the Moon. And every day there is another advancement.

Many of us parents are still limping along with basic cell phone and computer skills. Speaking only for myself, I am indeed lucky that my daughter advises me on how to "burn" a CD and how to "text message" (is that a new verb?).

As Friedman points out, and anyone who has ever tried to get assistance from a telephone help line already knows, we as a nation are competing in a global economy based on high-tech business skills. So what's the message? We've got to get in the game. Or as the Red Queen in "Through the Looking Glass" put it, "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Those of us who began our education pecking out papers on Underwood typewriters may be lost in time. But are our children ready for the future? At ease with an Xbox, iPod or PSP (whatever that is), they have the moves (especially the boys!). This may be good for jobs requiring hand-eye coordination and simulation training. But that is just not enough.

They need to be able to program. They need to understand what goes on behind the screen, so that they can take us to the next level of technology development. They need to be ready for what's coming. These technology skills are the basis for any job they will compete for in the marketplace -- from piloting a plane to nursing to car repair to researching and writing columns like this.

Let's agree that our kids are not necessarily thinking long-term. They are groaning about the return to routine, homework, school bus agony and classroom anxiety. So it is up to us.

Check those schedules. Is your child enrolled in classes that hone the use of technology? Is your child learning to program -- either inside or outside the classroom? Especially

push your girls. They often take the easy road if they feel uncomfortable with math, science or hi-tech environments, but they need this background.

Harvard University President Larry Summers was wrong, wrong, wrong when he suggested earlier this year that girls may not be up to the challenge. While we are working on how to make it easier for them, the key is parental involvement and support.

Everything is possible with the right attitude and strong backing. So help instill those attitudes. Don't let them off easy. Let's not pass on our own timidity and frustration about technology. And let's work to give our girls that competitive edge. We do not want them to encounter another glass ceiling.

Make sure your kids are taking every opportunity available to advance their technology skills. Otherwise, who will be able to program the next generation of cell phones for us?

Nancy Floreen

At-large member (D) of the Montgomery County Council;

chair of the county public school system's Girls in Information Technology Task Force